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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD MEETS ETHNIC AFFAIRS MINISTER

Ref: A) Hanoi 1666

¶1. (SBU) Summary: IRF Ambassador John Hanford met Minister/Chairman K'sor Phuoc of the GVN's Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs August 17 to discuss GVN efforts to facilitate the practice of religion among ethnic minority groups, particularly those in Vietnam's north.

Ambassador Hanford urged the GVN to take steps over the next six weeks that would advance our bilateral religious freedom agenda. These steps could include registering Protestant congregations in Vietnam's ethnic minority-dominated north and approving training for pastors. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North would be a good partner for the GVN in taking these steps. Minister Phuoc stated in familiar terms the challenges facing the GVN in dealing with Protestantism in the north; underlined his government's commitment to religious freedom; and, outlined what actions the GVN plans to take to facilitate religious practice, including registering congregations, encouraging elections of pastors-in-charge and providing land for places of worship. Ambassador Hanford and Minister Phuoc also briefly discussed recent beatings of Protestants in Thanh Hoa Province, and Phuoc had little to say beyond the official version of events. End Summary.

Ambassador Hanford's Presentation

¶2. (SBU) United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, accompanied by Ambassador Marine, met August 17 with GVN Committee on Religious Affairs Minister/Chairman K'sor Phuoc. Accepting Minister Phuoc's invitation to open the discussion, Ambassador Hanford noted that their previous meeting in Washington in July was a good opportunity to discuss the growth of Protestantism among ethnic minorities and the tensions that this is generating in some places. The USG appreciates the Minister's efforts to facilitate progress for ethnic minority groups, particularly in their religious activities.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford explained that the purpose of this visit to Vietnam is to discuss possible areas for progress in the area of religious freedom in the weeks ahead. This matter is more pertinent than ever considering the Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) discussions taking place in Congress, the need to make a decision on Vietnam's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) status and the President's planned November visit to Vietnam. Vietnam's positive actions to date have been notable, and this is a point that Ambassador Hanford has sought to make in meetings with Members of Congress and others.

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford expressed his hope that both sides could think creatively about ways in which the GVN could accelerate advances in religious freedom, perhaps by moving up the timetables of actions that are already in train. By taking a number of positive steps in the weeks ahead, Vietnam would be showing its considerable commitment to responding to our concerns. Similarly, a GVN roadmap, or general guidelines, of what it intends to do over the next year in the area of religious freedom would send a positive

signal about Vietnam's willingness to keep up our forward momentum, Ambassador Hanford said.

15. (SBU) The USG's particular area of concern remains the slow pace of registrations in northern Vietnam, including the Northwest Highlands, Ambassador Hanford continued. In spite of Hanoi's positive efforts, it appears that local officials still have not gotten the message. For example, we still hear of instances of local officials pressing individuals to renounce their Protestant faith, although we are aware that this is not GVN policy. We realize that it is impossible to solve these problems nationwide, simultaneously and in a quick manner. But, it seems that some steps could be taken in the near future to show that progress is being made in the north.

16. (SBU) As we are aware, under the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism, congregations that follow correct procedures and fill out the proper paperwork will be allowed to register, Ambassador Hanford said. According to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN), some 700 congregations have submitted applications to register in various places throughout the north. However, to the ECVN's knowledge, none of these applications has been approved. In fact, a large number of these applications have been returned unopened, or, in other cases, the people associated with the applications have received severe treatment from local officials, including harassment and beatings.

17. (SBU) The issue of registrations, at least for a symbolic number of congregations, should be easy to resolve in a short period of time, Ambassador Hanford continued. The USG is aware that the GVN has made a good-faith effort to arrange training sessions in the north for local officials on the legal framework on religion and the need to respect religious beliefs. Similar efforts in this area and others over the next six weeks, and a sense from the GVN of where it

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intends to go over the next year, would be welcome signals that Vietnam remains committed to working together to advance religious freedom, Ambassador Hanford said.

Phuoc: Protestantism in North a Complex Matter

18. (SBU) Minister Phuoc outlined in familiar terms the GVN's commitment to freedom of religion and belief for all of Vietnam's citizens. In Vietnam today, there are more or less ten different religions operating, including those such as Cao Dai and Hoa Hao that are products of Vietnam. Of course, there are many foreign religions as well, such as Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Protestantism. Most of these religions are "operating normally" in Vietnam, and, in the case of Protestantism, there are many branches.

For example, Protestantism in the Central Highlands is dominated by the Mennonites, while in the north the most prevalent branches are the Vietnam Christian Fellowship, the 7th Day Adventists, the Baptists and the Grace Baptist Church. Protestant adherents are present in 16 provinces, 88 districts and 459 communes in the north.

Many Protestant adherents were converted by "Voice of America" broadcasts in the ethnic Hmong and Dzao languages." (Note: Ambassadors Hanford and Marine later corrected Phuoc, noting that private religious groups operate these radio broadcasts. End Note.)

Because so many branches exist in one locality, there tends to be some overlap in Protestant religious groups' registration applications.

19. (SBU) Furthermore, certain segments of the population still have a nomadic lifestyle and move between provinces or over the border between Vietnam and Laos, Phuoc continued. Among them, many follow "Vang Chu," which is a clear influence of Laotian Hmong people, and they hope for the restoration of the ancient "Hmong Empire" under the flag of Vang Hao, who lives in the United States. There are often clashes within one family or a single community between those who have different religions. Prior to Protestantism's arrival in the Northwest Highlands in 1985, local people were polytheistic and followed traditional customs. With the French colonists came Catholicism. It is thus possible that within one family, three generations can follow three different religious beliefs:

polytheism or traditional ancestor worship, Catholicism and Protestantism. This situation can lead to clashes, Phuoc repeated.

¶10. (SBU) Even some Protestant leaders do not fully understand their own religion, not to mention Vietnam's legal framework on religion, Phuoc said. For example, some Protestants mistakenly believe that they are not allowed to drink alcohol, or do not have to serve in the army or pay taxes. They argue that because everything was created by God, they can practice their beliefs anywhere or do anything they want. In some extreme cases, a Protestant leader will even gather his followers together to commit mass suicide. All of these things explain why local authorities often have a hard time dealing with Protestantism and certain groups' applications to register, Phuoc noted.

What a Congregation Must Do

¶11. (SBU) The GVN's policy is to give guidance to provincial authorities on facilitating normal Protestant activities, the Minister continued. Under this guidance, all religious groups must register in order to practice their faith. In the case of Protestantism, these groups are asked to identify what branch they belong to, but many cannot. "They just know that they are Protestant," Phuoc said. Upon registration, the local Vietnam Fatherland Front representative and commune leadership should assist the congregation in electing a pastor-in-charge. Phuoc pledged to work closely with the ECVN to introduce the pastor-in-charge to the provincial authorities. The congregation must also organize a local congress and invite Protestant leaders (Note: presumably from Hanoi or elsewhere) to hold training sessions on true Protestant teachings. Where necessary, the authorities will also consider providing land to set up places of worship.

¶12. (SBU) One possibly difficult area is in the selection of the congregation's leadership, because there could be disputes among followers about who should become pastor-in-charge, Phuoc observed. In fact, in some cases, the ECVN has asked government authorities to resolve disputes when it became clear that people were abusing Protestantism to gain personal benefits. In any event, even if a congregation is not yet recognized or registered, it will still be allowed to gather to worship, Phuoc said.

¶13. (SBU) Repeating the steps a congregation must take to normalize its operations, Phuoc said that, once a congregation is registered, it must hold a congress to select its leadership and then it will be recognized by the State. At that point, the congregation's leader will have the legal status to work with local authorities to address his followers' needs. In some cases, this will entail facilitating

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